

STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE ANN M. VENEMAN,
SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE,
BEFORE THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
MAY 1, 2002

Chairman Hansen and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss our vision for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service. The Forest Service is a vital part of the Department, and the future of the agency has great significance to all Americans, especially those who work, recreate and live in and near our national forests.

I am accompanied today by Mark Rey, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, and Dale Bosworth, Chief of the Forest Service. Both Under Secretary Rey and Chief Bosworth have a wealth of experience in natural resources, and we are delighted to have them as part of our management team.

At the outset, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for your support of the Forest Service's role in making the recent Olympic Winter Games in Utah an outstanding and memorable event. Two signature events—the downhill and super G—took place at the Snowbasin Ski Resort, located on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. Our intent was to provide Olympics-related activities on the National Forest that were not only thrilling, but also safe and environmentally responsible. I believe we achieved all three objectives.

Our goal is for the Department of Agriculture including the Forest Service to be a world class provider of goods and services to the American people.

The Forest Service has hard working and dedicated employees. It maintains the world's premier wildland firefighting force. It provides high quality recreation to hundreds of millions of visitors each year. National forests are the source of clean water to hundreds of communities throughout the country. Forest Service scientists are world leaders in forest and rangeland research. The agency maintains the oldest and most comprehensive forest census in the world. And, through its ongoing partnership with state

foresters, the Forest Service assists thousands of non-federal forestland owners.

These are only a few of the many successes. Yet, while we have much to be proud of, we also recognize we have very much to do. My comments today will focus on five key areas:

1. Managing our Forests and Rangelands
2. Cooperation Across Government
3. Process Gridlock
4. Accountability and,
5. Reconnecting with Local Communities.

Although this list is not exhaustive, it includes the most critical areas for improving the Forest Service in the long run.

Managing our Forests and Rangelands

In 1960, Congress enacted the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act thereby defining the mission of the Forest Service. This law mandated that the Forest Service “manag[e] all the various renewable surface resources of the National Forests so that they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people.”

The ability to actively manage our forests and rangelands lies at the heart of the Forest Service's multiple use. Seventy-three million acres of national forest land is at moderate to high risk from unacceptably damaging wildfire. Seventy million acres are susceptible to destruction from insects and disease. Invasive species infestations are increasing. Our transportation infrastructure and recreational facilities are deteriorating and in need of repair. As these conditions worsen, it will become increasingly difficult to meet the multiple needs of maintaining healthy ecosystems, protecting rural communities, and supporting the public users of our national forests.

A renewed emphasis on proactive management is the first step toward reversing this trend. Management by doing nothing is not an option. We must take proactive measures to improve forest health, restore watersheds, improve our transportation and recreation infrastructure, and address other serious resource needs. Proactive management can also provide wood, forage, energy and other important products. By emphasizing what we leave on the land rather than what we take, we can ensure that our active management will be environmentally responsible while producing forests

and rangelands that are more resilient, productive, and better able to provide goods and services and other important benefits to people and communities.

Cooperation Across Government

Key to the success of the Forest Service is its ability to cooperate with other agencies to accomplish its mission. Our joint effort with the Department of the Interior to implement the National Fire Plan is a good example of our commitment to establish a seamless delivery of services across government. On April 10, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior announced the creation of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to achieve consistent implementation of the goals, action and policies of the National Fire Plan. This council will oversee the development of consistent fire management plans, a uniform set of outcome-based performance measures, common data elements and reporting systems, unified procedures for the delivery of an effective hazardous fuels reduction program, a unified preparedness model, and a number of other significant measures to ensure consistent management between the departments and across the landscape.

In addition, last August the two departments, in cooperation with the Western Governors Association, tribal interests, the National Association of

State Foresters and the National Association of Counties, adopted a Comprehensive 10-year Wildfire Strategy, establishing a new collaborative approach to reducing wildfire risks to communities and the environment. The implementation plan for the 10-year strategy will be finalized soon and will establish, for the first time, a uniform set of inter-departmental goals, performance measures and tasks for improving prevention and suppression, reducing hazardous fuels to protect communities, restoring fire-adapted ecosystems and promoting community well-being.

Process Gridlock

Perhaps our greatest challenge is to address what Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth describes as “analysis paralysis.” This is caused by overlapping statutory requirements, unnecessarily complicated internal rules and procedures. Several decades of court-made law and a proliferation of appeals and litigation have combined to substantially delay and increase the cost of our decision-making processes. Each year the Forest Service processes more NEPA documents to support management decisions than any other government agency. According to Forest Service estimates, the process and paperwork required to: (1) complete these documents; (2) meet other statutory and regulatory requirements; (3) and prepare agency

decisions to withstand possible appeals and litigation, account for between 40 and 60 percent of the total time spent on management activities. This does not include the time associated with appeals and litigation, which frequently ensue once decisions are made. Frequently, this onerous process does little to improve the quality of agency decisions.

The Forest Service is preparing a report to the Chief on process gridlock. The report will provide a diagnosis of the factors that contribute most directly to unnecessary and counterproductive procedural delays. We hope that it will stimulate a constructive dialogue that will help us identify our most serious problems and solve them together.

Accountability

Consistent with the President's Management Agenda, the Department and the Forest Service are committed to improving our financial and performance accountability to Congress and to the public. First and foremost we are committed to fidelity in the management of taxpayer dollars. To that end, we have committed significant Departmental resources to helping the Forest Service and the Department achieve a clean audit opinion. The Forest Service has already made significant progress in

reconciling the agency's cash records and accounting for real property. It is a priority to achieve a clean audit for the Forest Service, and our Chief Financial Officer, and Under Secretary Rey are actively engaged in assisting with process reforms to achieve that goal.

We are also committed to improving the way the Forest Service measures its performance. As demonstrated by our progress under the fire plan, the agency is moving aggressively to account for its accomplishments using meaningful, outcome-based performance measures that fully account for what it achieves with each investment. We are also working across government to integrate the Forest Service's performance measures with those of other land management agencies. Our progress is somewhat limited by the agency's overly-complex budget structure that emphasizes programs over performance. The agency appreciates the assistance Congress gave to begin to address the issues during the 2001 appropriations process. We would like to continue to work with this Committee and the Appropriations Committees to simplify the Forest Service budget, while placing greater emphasis on performance. By focusing on performance, we expect the agency to measurably improve in the quantity and quality of goods and services it delivers to the public per unit of investment.

Re-connecting with Local Communities

To succeed in the long run, the Forest Service must establish and maintain strong ties to local communities. Our recent success with the Olympics demonstrates what can be accomplished when the agency and communities come together as partners. Community-based management can and must be a bedrock principle within the Forest Service.

We have made significant progress toward strengthening our relationships with local communities. For example, we have worked hard to fully implement the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (Public Law 106-393). Over the past year, we have chartered 65 local resource advisory committees, which will work with counties and local Forest Service managers to identify and implement community-based resource management projects. We are receiving positive reports from all over the country about the success of these committees.

Local collaboration is also a fundamental principle of the 10-year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy. The strategy emphasizes that key decisions on management priorities, resource allocation, and project

implementation are best made in cooperation with communities at the local level.

Finally, we are working to deliver more local contracts across all of the agency's mission areas, particularly in fire prevention and suppression. Through the efforts of our Forest Products Lab, we are also promoting alternative markets and uses for the small diameter material and the biomass that comes from thinning and fuels reduction projects. The lab has actively cooperated with small businesses in rural communities to develop new technologies for producing furniture, home construction materials, and other value-added products. We highlighted many of these innovations during our recent Earth Day celebration at the Lab's Advanced Housing Technology Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me re-emphasize our most basic objectives. We are committed to managing and restoring our forests and rangelands, protecting communities for risk of catastrophic wildfires, and building the Forest Service into a world-class provider of goods and services to the American public. This will require, at a minimum, a sustained effort in the five areas

we have identified. We look forward to working with the Committee and you, Mr. Chairman, on these and other priorities the Committee might identify as critical to the long-term success of the Forest Service.